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The Director of Central Intelligence
Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC #00581-84
24 January 1984

AH. ER 84-278

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH : Vice Chairmen, National Intelligence Council
Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM : Fritz W. Ermarth
National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

SUBJECT : Discontinuities in the Development of the Soviet System

1. The [REDACTED] paper that you sent to me for comment, "The Coming Crisis in the Soviet Union," is part of a reviving debate on the basic development of the Soviet system. How stable is it? Where is it heading? What are the prospects for real system change, either by evolution or perhaps revolution, and how fast? Interest in the policy implications of these questions is rising too. Are the pressures on the Soviet system good for us or bad for us? What, if anything, should US policy do with regard to prospects for Soviet system change? Developments inside the USSR have fueled interest in these questions. The current administration's willingness to raise fundamental questions about the political and moral legitimacy of the Soviet system have also contributed to the debate. For the last twenty years, Western Sovietology has been stuck in an analytic blind alley asserting: Given the Soviet system's weaknesses it cannot last. Given its conservatism, it cannot evolve. Given its tenacious hold on power, it won't succumb to revolution. Yet all these statements cannot be true.

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2. Interestingly, it is not so much younger scholars from a new school of thought that have contributed to this debate. I've been away from the academic field for some time, so I cannot comment authoritatively on who stands where on this issue. But I have the distinct impression that it is a segment of the old Soviet and East European area specialists who are more attuned to the discontinuities of Russian-Soviet history and the

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possibilities of sharp breaks of pattern in the future. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] who believe that the Soviet system has become inherently unstable, that its evolution can be affected by external influences, and that change beneficial to us should be actively promoted by policy.

[REDACTED] Thesis, Strengths and Weaknesses

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3. [REDACTED] thesis is this: Since their creation after World War II, the Soviet-style political systems in East Europe have been vulnerable to popular political upheavals -- he calls them "landslides" -- which seriously threatened their survival and would have led in most cases to their demise had not Soviet military intervention or threat thereof saved them. These landslides had their origins in a range of economic, social, and political stresses, leading to a combination of popular disaffection and elite demoralization. Most cases on the list are familiar: East Germany in 1953, Poland and Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland and Croatia in the early to mid 1970s, Poland again in 1980-81.

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4. [REDACTED] argues that there are enough similarities between East Europe and the USSR to warrant looking for the prospect of similar Soviet landslides in the 1980s; he sees at least a 50% probability. He points to current evidence of social and economic stresses within the Soviet system. He cites historical evidence (mass desertions in World War II) of the lack of system legitimacy. And he predicts that a combination of continued trouble in Poland and leadership turmoil in the Kremlin could rupture system stability quite suddenly.

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5. [REDACTED] critics (among them a former NIO/USSR Arnold Horelick) maintain that it is all wrong to equate East Europe to the USSR, or even draw parallels. The political systems in East Europe have no legitimacy and the national political cultures involved are more prone to dissent. The Soviet system does, by contrast, have some roots in real patriotism and Soviet peoples are more patient in suffering than are East Europeans. (Horelick does agree with [REDACTED] that conditions for discontinuity in the USSR are ripening.)

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6. I believe [REDACTED] is basically right, although his particular analysis has weaknesses. East Europe is a kind of laboratory that shows us how Soviet-style systems can come unstuck. The parallels don't have to be exact to be pertinent. More to the point, we don't have to look to East Europe to become sensitive about discontinuities in the USSR. Russian and Soviet history has itself displayed such discontinuities. The Russian revolution was the culmination of a long string of them. In the Soviet period, the purges and collectivization were discontinuities imposed from above. In the first year of the war, the system nearly cracked. It showed signs of a landslide after Stalin died. The Soviet crackdown in Czechoslovakia was very much inspired by the fear of spillover into the USSR.

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7. My quarrel [REDACTED] is that he doesn't carry his argument far enough. It is virtually certain that the Soviet system will see repeated local outbreaks of popular discontent in coming years, as it has in the recent past. [REDACTED] may be right in giving a 50 percent chance to such outbreaks being large enough to be very visible and warrant very visible repression. But Russian history is full of examples of uprisings, large and small, eventually suppressed. What we are really concerned about is prospects for fundamental change. Can the accumulation of stresses, repeated and perhaps escalating outbursts of popular discontent, put enough pressure on the system to produce rapid evolutionary and even revolutionary change in the system? At some point, the differences between the USSR and East Europe favor change in the Soviet system; there is no one outside it to save the Soviet system.

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8. The next major weakness of the [REDACTED] view is that it doesn't credit the importance of external factors in future Soviet system change, except for the so-called "international demonstration effect" which raises Soviet popular expectations. In the light of Soviet and Russian history one can say clearly: Positive Soviet change depends on a) the survival of a healthy West to serve as a moral and political beacon, b) the conduct of Western foreign and information policies in such a way as to separate patriotism in Soviet society from support of the ruling elite, and c) inflicting external defeats on the aggrandizing policies of the USSR whose success is vital to system legitimacy.

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9. [REDACTED] time horizons are too short. I would say that repeated, if not continual, "landslides" could afflict the USSR in the next decade. More interesting, there is a 50 percent chance over the next 25 years of major system change, in my personal view.

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Implications for Intelligence

10. A number of very weighty questions arise that we have to pay much more attention to in the years ahead:

- + What are the social, economic, political sources of stress on the system that generate popular disaffection? We are, of course, looking at these issues, but not enough. The PFIAB Panel chaired last year by Herb Levine (on which I served) called for more analysis of the "soft" aspects of the Soviet social and economic scene to get at these issues.
- + At what point do the problems of society wear thin the tolerance of significant segments of the population for the system? Here we are much weaker, as is the whole academic community.

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- + The most important question of all: When do stresses and challenges so demoralize the elites and leadership that they start "defecting" from their prime task of holding power, and communicating to the people that they are losing their grip? This is the crucial moment that shows up in all revolutionary situations. In my opinion, we pay too little attention, through open or classified sources, to the mood, morale, and self-confidence of the Soviet leadership. Soft though it may be, a grasp of their changing psychology and mood is more important to US security, even in the short run, than predicting by a week or so whether the Soviets will rejoin some negotiation.
- + The ultimate question is what is likely to replace the current totalitarian, inherently expansionist Soviet system. Clearly we would hope for a more liberal, constitutional system. But it could well be another authoritarian system that we would also find distasteful. The most important thing for us, however, is that a new system not have the Marxist-Leninist manichean view of the world and not be driven to extend its sway over even larger parts of the globe. If we were more cognizant of the various strains of thought competing inside the society, we should be able to help shape the outlook of whatever system might replace the current one. All of which underlines once again the importance of keeping up with the society, not just the regime.

11. How do we operationalize an attack on these questions? I'll be working with others in the analysis and collection communities to improve our posture on these issues. Meanwhile, I offer the following thoughts:

- + The Soviet-watching elements of the community must simply remind themselves that throughout Russian and Soviet history abiding continuities have given way to sharp discontinuities. We are blinded more by mental habits than lack of information. Many younger scholars and analysts regard the tranquility of the Brezhnev years as "normalcy." It is not.

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- + HUMINT sources need to be developed and better exploited where possible, particularly on leadership morale and basic perspectives as to "where they are in history."

What are we doing about it?

12. In the last year or so, three important papers dealing with Soviet systems survival were published: SOVA's Soviet Society in the 1980s: Problems and Prospects, SOVA's Soviet Elite Concerns About Official Corruption and Popular Unrest, and the NIC Memorandum on Dimensions of Civil Unrest in the Soviet Union.

13. This year we are doing an NIE on The Significance of Political and Social Discontent in the USSR. With your approval we have disseminated the TORs to the community (attached) and [REDACTED] the drafter, is now doing research for this pathbreaking NIE that will put the issue on the intelligence community's agenda.

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14. In conjunction with that NIE we are also sponsoring a conference on 29 and 30 March that will bring together academic experts, emigres, and government officials. The attached letter of invitation to one of the participants (Attachment 3) will give you a feel for what we plan to do. We expect both good education and methodological instruction.

15. Andy Marshall in OSD is sponsoring similar kind of work and will be invited to our conference.

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17. In sum,

- The [REDACTED] view -- that we must be alert to sharp ruptures in the established patterns of Soviet politics and social development -- must be represented in our work; it has important implications for intelligence and policy.
- I plan to press the intelligence community to continue and improve its collection and analysis of Soviet societal developments.

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-- A whole range of new policy [REDACTED] could
be emerging from our intensified analytical efforts; that's a
subject for another day.

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To Frty Ermath -

I found this
interesting - Herb Meyer +
Gordon Mc Donald gave
me as example of new
school of younger scholars
taking view that
"discontinuities" are likely
in Russia - What do
you know about this.

H J L

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